

LIFE-SPAN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

NONNORMATIVE LIFE EVENTS

Edited by

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Preface

The topic of the Seventh West Virginia University Life-Span volume was chosen to complement the content of the fourth Life-Span volume published in 1975. That volume on Normative Life Crises (Datan & Ginsberg, 1975) was the first to break with the strictly academic tradition of the previous volumes to "... create an interface between academic and applied perspectives on the life cycle..." (Datan & Ginsberg, 1975, p. xiii). The contributors to that volume analyzed the effects of normative life crises, those events which occur to most members of a specific culture or group (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980) on four levels: academic and applied perspectives, individual development, the family life cycle, and the social system. In contrast, we chose to focus the seventh volume on the effects of nonnormative life crises, those which occur to only certain individuals within a specific culture or group and are for the most part considered to be disruptive to the normal life course.

This issue of disruptiveness is critical, though. The ancient Chinese characters for "crisis" consisted of two parts: problem and opportunity. A subtheme of this volume, then, was to examine not only the problematic aspects of nonnormative life events, but the opportunity aspects as well. We thought it advantageous to go beyond the traditional life-span academicians in inviting chapters for this book.

Contributors were invited from a number of orientations and academic disciplines, ranging from traditional life-span psychologists to practicing clinical psychologists. The dynamic interplay of these diverse approaches results in a very exciting level of intellectual and practical stimulation which we feel is reflected in the chapters of this volume. The chapters are grouped topically to mirror the pairings of the conference presentations. Two papers originally presented at the conference, one by Noel McIntosh, Rosalind Parkinson, and Ann Dacey entitled "Adolescent Pregnancy" and another by David Rigler entitled "The Terminally Ill Child" have been replaced by the chapters by McCluskey, Killarney, and Papini

(Chapter 4), and Callahan, Brasted, and Granados (Chapter 6). The contributions of Rigler and McIntosh *et al.* were significant to the quality of the conference, and we hope that they find in these replacements some of their influence.

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CHAPTER 1

The Dimensionalization of Life Events

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I. Introduction

The life course is like the act of writing an essay, beginning with promises about goals to be reached, continuing with development toward these goals, and ending with variable success in attaining the goals. In the writing, the essay is divided into sections by major transitions and into subsections and paragraphs by lesser transitions, sometimes with footnoted digressions but always punctuated by pauses, stops, and starts. Like essays, lives vary in content, organization, length, and style; they vary in meaning and merit. But let us limit our attention to the analogues of punctuating and sectioning, lest we be beguiled by possible analogues to the typewriter or the Great Copyeditor in the Sky.

Our analogy implies, aptly, that the life course is formed by major and minor transitions. Most relevant research has been concerned with the major transitions, which are stressful and disruptive of customary behavior patterns (Danish, Smyer, & Nowak, 1980; Hultsch & Plemons, 1979; Lieberman, 1975). Appropriately, these major transitions are usually called life *crises*. The word *crisis* comes from the Greek *krinein*, "to separate," and means a

decisive moment, turning point, or crucial time. In medicine, it refers to the turning point in a disease, the outcome of which will be recovery or death. This “pathological and often fatalistic [Riegel, 1975, p. 100]” implication seems to be commonly associated with the term. To avoid this dire implication, some writers use the word *event*, which in its broadest sense merely means something that happens, and therefore more clearly can refer to positive “crises” such as graduating, marrying, and being promoted, as well as to negative crises such as failing, divorcing, and being fired.

In its broadest sense, *event* has a very mild connotation. Having a drink of water, for example, is an event, but in most circumstances it is unlikely to have a noteworthy effect on the life course. Nevertheless, it must have some effect, however small and transient, and therefore a decision to ignore it would be arbitrary. Events vary in impact, with no large, naturally given gap separating noteworthy from trivial ones. But the arbitrary decision must be made to keep the research field tractable. We will therefore limit our discussion to *noteworthy* life events. We mean by *life events* possible happenings during the life course, and by *noteworthy* we mean that they have been discussed in the relevant literature.

The relevant literature is complicated for at least three reasons. First, it comes from several disciplines, including medicine, psychiatry, psychology, social work, and sociology, which offer different perspectives on life events and different theories about the mechanisms underlying their effects. Also, the total number of life events that have been identified is very large; for the analysis we shall present later, we used about 350 items. Finally, the taxonomic classification, or dimensionalization, of life events is chaotic, perhaps because of the variety of theoretical orientations of life-event researchers and the large number and variety of life events that have been considered noteworthy. In this chapter we shall review the life-event dimensions that have been identified and explore the implications of proposed classification systems. We begin with an examination of two very general approaches to life events.

II. Life Events as Processes and as Markers

Danish *et al.* (1980) identified two general conceptualizations of life events: as processes and as markers. Viewed as *processes*, events have antecedents, durations, contexts, and outcomes. They are also called *transitions* (e.g., Brim, 1976), although they can be conceptualized as causes of transitions, or causes of *becoming* (Overton & Reese, 1973). Viewed as *markers*, events signal that a transition has occurred or is impending. Danish *et al.* (1980) cited as examples retirement, as a marker of “the

transition from an active work career to a life of leisure [p. 342],” and “becoming pregnant,” as “a marker in the course of one’s family development [p. 342].” Markers have causal status, but as causes of *being* rather than as causes of becoming or change. Becoming pregnant is a cause of change—and is a process—and therefore Danish *et al.* should have cited “being pregnant” rather than “becoming pregnant” as the marker. Retirement, or being retired, is an apt example, because it is a marker or product of the process of retiring, which begins before retirement and includes expectations about postretirement life.

The distinction between events as processes and as markers or products is usually not clear in the literature. For example, some investigators have studied life events as dependent variables, sometimes using age, birth cohort, and time of measurement (Schaie, 1965), or pairs of these, as independent variables. (In the sociological literature, time of measurement is usually called *period*.) A problem with the approach is that the life events investigated are *treated* as outcomes rather than as processes regardless of how they are *conceptualized*.

Another example of the process–product confusion is that life events have usually been labeled with nouns and noun phrases rather than with gerunds. Havighurst (1953) used gerunds, such as “learning to walk,” but Holmes and Rahe (1967) and Paykel (1973) used noun phrases. Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel (1978) used mostly noun phrases, and the gerunds they used, such as “leaving home for the first time” and “failing a course,” seem to refer more to products than to processes. Of course, nouns can be used to label processes; but gerunds label them less ambiguously because by definition a *gerund* is the name of an action.

The process–product confusion may reflect a difference between deeply held convictions or presuppositions. In mechanistic thought, time is conceptualized as atomistic, consisting of discrete elements, and process is conceptualized as a succession of cross-sections. In the fundamental type of law, called a *process law* (Bergmann, 1957), instantaneous assessment of a system is used to predict future states of the system, or to postdict past states. The concept of process therefore tends to blur into a concept of product—concrete, material, and discrete. In dialectical thought, in contrast, time is conceptualized as a continuous range, area, or spread, which includes the immediate “past” as well as the immediate “future” (Reese, Note 1; see also Kvale, 1974, 1977; Riegel, 1977; 1979, Chap. 8). In dialectical thought, therefore, process is conceptualized as an ongoing activity in a context that includes a spread of time. The Mbuti, who are an African pygmy people, conceptualize the life process dialectically: A person moves through life in a space–time sphere (Turnbull, 1978; if the movement is too violent or too sudden, the person may break out of the sphere and become “wazi-wazi”—

'disoriented and unpredictable' [p. 166]). Such a process can be said to have antecedents and consequences only if these words are put in quotation marks to indicate that they are a part of a unitary whole and can be distinguished from it only analytically. This way of thinking about process may be less familiar than the mechanistic way to many researchers who study life events. If so, their concept of process might tend toward stasis; that is, it might tend to acquire an implication of product instead of retaining the dynamic implication of process.

III. Dimensions of Life Events

The *dimensions* of life events are their "structural characteristics" (Danish *et al.*, 1980), "properties" (Brim & Ryff, 1980), or "attributes" (Hultsch & Plemons, 1979). Life events are obviously multidimensional, but some researchers believe that a single dimension is so salient in importance that life events can be treated as functionally unidimensional. Other researchers disagree and treat life events as functionally multidimensional. The "unidimensional" group includes, for example, Holmes and his colleagues (e.g., Holmes & Masuda, 1973; Holmes & Rahe, 1967), for whom the salient dimension is impact or stressfulness. The Holmes and Rahe (1967) Social Readjustment Rating Scale includes 43 events, each of which has a mean impact rating. The scale is used by asking a person to indicate which events have occurred in some specified period of life, then summing the rated impacts of the events indicated. The scale includes both desirable and undesirable events, such as "marriage," "vacation," "Christmas," "divorce," "foreclosure of mortgage or loan," and "minor violations of the law." However, the desirability of the events is disregarded in the scoring because both kinds of events are stressful. Thus, the sum is interpreted to reflect the amount of stress the person experienced in the specified period.

The "unidimensional" group also includes Lieberman (1975), at least with respect to life *crises*. He conceptualized life crises as involving three elements—a loss or disruption of some kind, a demand for behavioral change, and a particular meaning attached to the event. However, despite this multidimensional conception of life crises, he concluded that the central element is the degree of behavioral change demanded, making life crises *functionally* unidimensional.

The other group, taking a multidimensional approach, is not unanimous about the number of life-event dimensions, as might be expected, or even about the nature of the dimensions, as will be seen later. They have identified a total of at least 35 different dimensions. Some of these have a theoretical

basis and some have an empirical basis in factor analyses, but most seem to have been derived from speculation or intuition. A further complication is that relatively little systematic research has been done on the significance of most of these dimensions and on their interrelations (Hultsch & Plemons, 1979).

Some order can be introduced into this chaos by using a classification system proposed by Brim and Ryff (1980). They noted that some dimensions (or “properties,” as they said) refer to the *effects* of events, others refer to the affected person’s *perceptions* of events, and still others refer to *event properties*—characteristics of the events themselves independent of the effects of the events and perceptions of them. We used this system, in an a priori way, to classify the 35 dimensions of life events we found in our survey, which was by no means exhaustive. (For example, we have omitted Cobb’s [1974] model because it is explicitly limited to the relationship of life events to illness. He separated *objective stress*, *subjective stress*, and *strain* and identified several dimensions of subjective stress and strain. He also emphasized the moderating effect of the social context in which an event occurs, as did Brown [1974b].) Table 1.1 shows our classification. Within each type the dimensions are alphabetized for ease of reference. As can be seen, the “event” dimensions are more numerous than the “perception” dimensions, and both are more numerous than the “effect” dimensions (about 54%, 29%, and 17% of the total, respectively). *Event* dimensions are by definition objective, and *perception* dimensions subjective, perhaps accounting for the difference in their frequency—reflecting not only the differential ease of studying these respective types of dimensions but also the objectivity of mainstream American gerontology, psychology, and sociology, which account for the majority of the relevant research. The effect dimensions are the least numerous, perhaps because of a conceptual difficulty. *Effect* dimensions refer explicitly to the effects of life events; hence they implicate the conceptualization of life events as processes, or causes. However, effect dimensions actually refer to properties of outcomes, obviously, rather than to properties of causes, and therefore they may seem inappropriate for analyzing life events conceptualized as processes.

All but six of the dimensions included in Table 1.1 are quantifiable; the six exceptions are qualitative. The qualitative dimensions are *domain* and *focus*, which are effect dimensions; *meaning*, which is a perception dimension; and *context*, *source*, and *type*, which are event dimensions. One of the qualitative dimensions—*focus*—and all of the quantitative dimensions seem to be straightforward and in need of no further explication than that given in the table. The other five qualitative dimensions need explication, but *meaning* is entirely subjective and is too complicated to be explicated in this chapter (for